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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5376
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001094

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN GOVERNMENT REPRESSES PRO-PKK RALLIES

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Pro-PKK protests by Syrian Kurds in Northeast Syrian city of Qamishli were met by heavy police repression. The ensuing crackdown caused multiple injuries and the death of at least one Syrian Kurd. There were also several arrests at a pro-PKK rally in the northern border town of Ein al-Arab and security services prevented a pro-PKK demonstration in Aleppo. In the wake of the incident, all major Syrian Kurdish parties released a joint statement that condemned both the Syrian and Turkish governments. Although the Kurds have regularly held rallies in the Northeast of the country since the massive riots of March 2004, the rallies do not usually result in this level of violence. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On November 2, Syrian police opened fire in Qamishli on 300 Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) members who organized a rally in support of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). (Note: The PYD is the PKK's political affiliate in Syria.) Estimates from local and regional media report that the impetus for police action came when some of the protesters unfurled banners criticizing President Bashar al-Assad for his statements in support of Ankara's moves against Kurdish-administered Iraq. According to Hervin Osse, Damascus representative of the Kurdish Future Movement, over 1000 more Kurdish residents of Qamishli joined the original PYD demonstration in response to the police shooting. Consequently, approximately 30 minutes later the police opened fire again. Issa Khalil Hussein, 25, one of the Qamishli residents who was not among the original PYD protesters was shot and killed by police, according to local contacts. At least, three to five demonstrators were also wounded, according to local and regional media reports.

¶3. (SBU) The next day, local contacts and regional media report that over 5,000 mourners joined the funeral procession for Hussein. This outpouring of Kurdish solidarity was organized and attended by Kurdish Future Movement, the Kurdish Yekiti Party, and the Kurdish Azadi Party, in addition to the PYD. In conjunction with the funeral, these parties, the Kurdish Democratic Union and the Kurdish Democratic Front issued a public statement that accused the Turkish government of using the fight against PKK terrorism as a pretext to attack self-governing Kurdish peoples in Iraq. (Note: the Kurdish Democratic Front and the Kurdish Democratic Union are amalgamations of parties that joined the Damascus Declaration, a broad-based group formed in 2001 that calls for greater democracy and freedom in Syria.) The statement said that the Syrian government should hold responsible those who ordered the police to open fire on November 2, and that the government should respect the

people's right to freedom of assembly. Finally, the statement stressed unity between the PYD and the other Kurdish factions. (Note: Traditionally, the more militant PYD has avoided cooperation with other Kurdish factions within Syria viewing them as less committed to Kurdish independence.)

¶4. (C) Elsewhere in Syria, the Kurdish Organization for Human Rights and Public Liberties in Syria (DAD) reported that Syrian security services had arrested dozens of pro-PKK protesters in the northern border town of Ein-al-Arab and had prevented a pro-PKK rally in Aleppo. Osse speculated that the Syrian crackdown on pro-PKK protests may be Damascus's attempt to strengthen their burgeoning relationship with Ankara. Osse also said that the crackdown may also be Syria's way to demonstrate that it shares Turkey's interest in opposing greater autonomy for their respective Kurdish minorities.

¶5. (C) Comment. While the SARG clearly may use action against the PKK to support the relationship with Ankara, the real reason for the crackdown is more likely the SARG's justified fear that the Syrian Kurds form a serious potential opposition threat to the regime. The SARG will continue to react disproportionately to any Kurdish stirrings. Though Syrian Kurds will band together in response to SARG attacks on their own, we believe they will not rally around the extremist tendencies of the PKK.

CORBIN